

VU Research Portal

The influence of family structure on the contact between older parents and their adult biological children and stepchildren in the Netherlands

van der Pas, S.; van Tilburg, T.G.

published in

The Journals of Gerontology. Series B : Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences
2010

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.1093/geronb/gbp108](https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbp108)

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

van der Pas, S., & van Tilburg, T. G. (2010). The influence of family structure on the contact between older parents and their adult biological children and stepchildren in the Netherlands. *The Journals of Gerontology. Series B : Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 65B(2), 236-245. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbp108>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

The Influence of Family Structure on the Contact Between Older Parents and Their Adult Biological Children and Stepchildren in the Netherlands

Suzan van der Pas and Theo G. van Tilburg

Faculty of Social Sciences, VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Objectives. This article examines the effect that family structure has on the contact between older adults and their (step)children. A comparison is made among 3 family structures: biological families, complex stepfamilies, and simple stepfamilies.

Methods. The sample consists of respondents aged 55 years or older from the “Living Arrangements and Social Networks of Older Adults in the Netherlands” survey of 1992. The contact between biological relationships and steprelationships is measured by means of 2 items: contact frequency and whether contact is perceived as regular and important.

Results. Parents have less contact with their biological children in stepfamilies compared with parents with their children in biological families. The contact with biological children is perceived as more often regular and important in biological families and complex stepfamilies compared with simple stepfamilies. No difference was found in the contact between stepparents and stepchildren in simple and complex stepfamilies. However, the contact with stepchildren is perceived as more often regular and important in simple stepfamilies in comparison to complex stepfamilies.

Discussion. It is not so much the difference between biological children and stepchildren that counts when studying the contact between (step)parents and (step)children, as what the structure of the aging (step)family is.

Key Words: Biological children—Contact—Older parents—Stepchildren—Stepfamily.

WESTERN societies have witnessed profound demographic changes over the past few decades, changes that have influenced the structure of the family, shaping relationships between older parents and adult children. In particular, as a result of the rise in divorce and relatively high remarriage rates, complex family structures have become more common. An increasing proportion of older adults have experienced diverse marital transitions (Wachter, 1995), which have affected the availability and structure of their kinship networks (De Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 2002). Remarriage or repartnering, particularly when parents have both biological and stepchildren, creates a new family structure where family norms and obligations are less clearly defined and understood than in first-marriage families. This lack of institutionalized guidelines for remarried or repartnered families can lead to uncertainty regarding relationships with and obligations to new and former kin (Cherlin, 1978).

Research on intergenerational relationships beyond the household has repeatedly shown that older parents have regular contact and receive a substantial amount of social support from their biological adult children (Mancini & Blieszner, 1989). However, we know very little about later-life stepfamilies. Stepfamilies have been viewed as “incomplete institutions” (Cherlin, 1978), “deviant or deficit family forms” (Coleman & Ganong, 1997), or “reconstituted nuclear families” (Levin, 1997). In this respect, the idealized

model of the nuclear family has functioned as the implicit standard for a long time. Steprelationships are generally considered to be more ambiguous than biological parent-child ties (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), and adult stepchildren are believed to have fewer obligations toward stepparents than toward biological parents (Ganong & Coleman, 2006), resulting in less mutual contact compared with biological relationships.

Although comparisons have been made in previous studies between adult biological children and stepchildren (e.g., White, 1992), they are seldom explicitly based on comparisons within families. Understanding stepfamilies’ relationships and the ambiguity surrounding family members’ roles requires knowledge of the contact between parents and biological and stepchildren in the same family. In other words, the contact between parents and biological and stepchildren does not stand on its own but is influenced by family structure in general.

As an extension of the idea of intergenerational ambivalence reflecting both positive and negative dimensions within parent-adult child relationships, Ward (2008) has suggested that the concept of “collective ambivalence” across multiple children can be viewed as a function of family structure. Collective ambivalence has been defined as having relations that are more positive with one or some children and less positive with others (Ward, Spitze, & Deane, 2009). In this respect, collective ambivalence

reflects simultaneous and contradictory attitudes or feelings toward “family life” (Pillemer & Suito, 2008; Ward, Deane, & Spitze, 2008).

An important characteristic of family life is the structure in which the relationships are embedded. Ambivalence can be seen as a bridging concept between social structure and individual action, whereby ambivalence is resolved by both choosing between social roles and also redefining them (Connidis & McMullin, 2002). Within a more complex family structure, such as a stepfamily, the guidelines and norms for role performance are less clear and may lead to more strained relations (Cherlin, 1978), thereby increasing collective ambivalence.

In this study, we first describe the family structure of older parents and their biological children and stepparents and their stepchildren. We then address the question of the extent to which family structure affects the contact between (a) parents and their biological children and (b) stepparents and their stepchildren. We examine two forms of contact, namely contact frequency and the extent to which the contact is perceived as regular and important. Of particular interest are the contact with biological children in stepfamilies in contrast with biological children in biological families and the variation in contact between stepparents and stepchildren within different stepfamily types.

A stepfamily can be formed in many ways and can be defined as a family in which at least one of the adults has children from a previous relationship. To get a better understanding of the complexity of stepfamilies, researchers have identified different typologies of stepfamilies based on the presence or absence of children from the present union, residence of children from prior unions, and the age of the children (see further Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Our aim was to provide a differentiated picture of later-life stepfamilies by describing the family structure of older (step)parents, comparing three main types of families (Table 1): First, in a “biological family,” neither partner has biological children from other relationships. Second, a “complex stepfamily” is a stepfamily that is formed when parents, each with children from a prior union, start a new relationship. Third, a “simple stepfamily” is a stepfamily formed when one of the parents has children from a prior union. Within the two stepfamilies described, a further differentiation is made between those who have shared biological children.

Within a stepfamily, the parent can enter both as parent and as stepparent, depending on whether he or she has children from a prior union and whether the new partner brings children to the union. Because we rely on the information of only one of the parents, this has consequences for the description of the simple stepfamily. The individual is either a parent with children from a prior union (who has a partner who is the stepparent) or is the stepparent (with a partner who has children from a prior union).

Family Structure and Contact

Previous research is mixed on the extent to which family structure influences the contact between parents and their adult biological and stepchildren. One of the few examples of research on later-life steprelationships is a study conducted by Pezzin and Steinberg Schone (1999), who observed that the amount of care that a parent received from a nonresident child varied by family structure. Parents with only stepchildren were less likely to receive care from children than parents with only biological children or parents with both biological and stepchildren. Moreover, White (1992) observed that remarried parents have less contact with both biological and stepchildren compared with first-marriage parents with no stepchildren. In a more recent study, Ward and colleagues (2009) found that the quality of relationships and contact was not only lower in stepfamilies than in nonstepfamilies but also lower between parents with biological children in stepfamilies. They concluded that the lower quality of relations in stepfamilies was primarily caused by the presence of stepchildren. This is consistent with the conclusion of Henderson and Taylor (1999) that the largest discrepancy in parental treatment toward adult (step) children occurs in families where there is a biological child and a stepchild.

Stepfamilies formed when children are minors have different experiences from those formed when children are grown-up (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Remarried or repartnered parents with young children will share a longer life span together. Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that stepchildren who were adults at the time of their parent's remarriages have not coresided with their parents, whereas young stepchildren most probably have spent some time cohabiting with their parents. Parents with stepchildren who entered the stepfamily as minors might therefore have more contact with their stepchildren than parents with stepchildren who were already (or nearly) adult.

Having a shared biological child in a stepfamily may also affect the contact between parents and (step)children. Ganong and Coleman (1994) have referred to such a biological child in a stepfamily as a “concrete baby,” cementing steprelationships. Because the stepfamily members have a blood relative in common, the ambiguity in steproles may lessen and the commitment to each other may increase (Cherlin, 1978).

Marital History and Contact

Because of changes in family formation and dissolution, a growing number of adults will experience divorce and remarriage, which will have an impact on parent-child relationships (Aquilino, 1994b). In this study, both the current marital status and the marital history of older parents are considered. Divorce has a negative effect on parent-adult child contact, regardless of the age of the children when the

Table 1. Different Family Structures According to Relationship Type of the Respondent or Partner

Family structure	Respondent		Partner	
	Biological child	Stepchild	Biological child	Stepchild
Biological	CU		CU	
Complex	FU respondent	FU partner	FU partner	FU respondent
Complex with shared biological children	FU respondent and CU	FU partner	FU partner and CU	FU respondent
Simple (without stepchildren)	FU respondent			FU respondent
Simple with shared biological children	FU respondent and CU		CU	FU respondent
Simple (with stepchildren)		FU partner	FU partner	
Simple with shared biological children	CU	FU partner	FU partner and CU	

Notes: The current study focuses on one of the individuals in a partner relationship. He or she is denoted here as the respondent. The partner concerns the current partner or, for single respondents, the partner with whom the respondent had the last union. CU = current union; FU = former union.

divorce occurred (Aquilino, 1994a; Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990), and following divorce, father-child relationships are less close than mother-child relationships (Webster & Herzog, 1995). The contact between parents and children is contingent on the gender of both parents and children, whereby the mother-daughter bond is stronger than the mother-son and the paternal bond (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997).

In addition, remarriage further affects the parent-child relationship. Nowadays, most remarriages follow a divorce, although remarriage after widowhood has been common for a long time (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). Remarriage has a negative effect on parent-adult child contact, whether after widowhood or divorce (Kalmijn & Dykstra, 2006). Parents who remarry when their children are minors have less contact with their adult children than nondivorced parents do (Aquilino, 1994a) but have more contact than divorced parents who do not remarry (White, 1992).

Given this literature, the current study employs the concept of collective ambivalence to consider the association between family structure and contact. Prior research suggests that more complex family structures have a negative effect on the contact between parents and both their biological and their stepchildren, thereby also increasing collective ambivalence. We can, therefore, expect that parents and (step)children within stepfamilies have less contact than parents and children in biological families. Although previous studies do not give us clear guidelines on whether there will be differences in the contact within complex and simple stepfamilies, there is some indication that more complex family structures where both biological and stepchildren are present will lead to more difficulties in negotiating roles and relationships in stepfamilies and hence to less contact among parents and children in complex stepfamilies than in simple stepfamilies.

METHODS

Respondents

Data were available for older people who participated in the "Living Arrangements and Social Networks of Older Adults" research program (Knipscheer, De Jong Gierveld,

Van Tilburg, & Dykstra, 1995). The program used a stratified random sample of men and women born between 1903 and 1937. The sample was taken from the population registers of 11 municipalities that represent differences in religion and urbanization in the Netherlands. The oldest individuals in these areas (the oldest men, in particular) were overrepresented in the sample. The survey was carried out in 1992 with a total of 4,494 respondents interviewed in their homes. The cooperation rate was 62%, which is relatively high compared with many surveys in the Netherlands where participation rates are low (De Leeuw & De Heer, 2002). In the context of the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam (Deeg, Van Tilburg, Smit, & De Leeuw, 2002), respondents born in 1908 or later were followed up during four subsequent data collection points with 3-year intervals. These follow-ups were only used when stepchildren were not identified at baseline.

For 11 respondents, we had no data on the existence of children, and for 238 parents, the interviews had to be shortened or broken off because of frailty, resulting in no data on the characteristics of children. Respondents were not included who had no biological or stepchildren ($n = 622$), who only had adopted or foster children ($n = 21$), and who had one or more children living in the parental home ($n = 521$) due to the fact that coresiding children have daily contact with (step)parents.

Furthermore, 50 parents with a partner status or marital history that deviated from the study were not included. These included 36 married parents who did not coreside with their spouse for various reasons, predominantly due to the institutionalization of the spouse, 5 parents who had never been partnered, 4 parents who had not been married before the current partnership, 2 parents who cohabited before the current marriage, and 3 respondents who did not have a partner and of whom the marital history was unknown. Moreover, 58 parents who had a nonmarital partnerrelationship and maintained separate households were excluded because we were unable to determine whether other parents who are (re)married or cohabiting have previously had such an arrangement. Maintaining separate households may have a different effect on the contact with biological children and stepchildren than (re)married or

cohabiting parents. The marital history was unknown for 28 parents, and they were also excluded. Finally, 189 parents living in nursing or residential homes were excluded as their contact with their children is not comparable to that of individuals living independently.

The final sample consisted of 1,339 men and 1,417 women between 54 and 89 years of age (M age = 72.5 years, SD = 9.2). In total, data from relationships with 8,515 biological children and 376 stepchildren were analyzed; adopted and foster children were excluded. The sample of 2,756 respondents included in the study had a gender composition similar to the sample of 1,738 excluded respondents (51% women), $\chi^2(1) = .2$, $p > .05$, but was on average almost a year younger, $t(3186.1) = 2.6$, $p < .001$.

Measures

The contact between older adults and their (step)children was measured for each relationship separately. Preceding the questions on contact, an identification question was asked to obtain information on having children.

Identification of children.—The identification of children followed a two-step procedure. First, the number of children was assessed by means of the question: “How many children have you had? You should consider not only the children whose natural mother (father) you are, but also step- and adoptive children.” In the second step, data were collected for each child: names and gender; whether the child was a biological child, stepchild, or adoptive child; and whether the child was deceased. The identification of all children was repeated in 2002 with a similar questionnaire. Furthermore, at each longitudinal observation, children could be additionally identified by means of the network delineation (see subsequently). Not all children were identified at baseline. Specifically, three biological children of one respondent were identified at one of the follow-up observations. Of the 376 stepchildren, 144 were identified at one of the follow-up observations. These stepchildren are all from the union with which the respondent had a relationship with at baseline. Of these 56 parents who had stepchildren at baseline but did not identify them, 66% were part of a complex stepfamily compared with 34% parents in a simple stepfamily. Of the 92 parents who did identify stepchildren at baseline, 48% were part of a complex stepfamily compared with 52% parents in a simple stepfamily, $\chi^2(1) = 4.7$; $p < .05$.

Contact frequency.—Frequency of contact was assessed by the question: “How often are you in touch with . . . ?” Response categories were *never*, *once a year or less*, *few times a year*, *once a month*, *once a fortnight*, *once a week*, *few times a week*, and *everyday*. These categories were assigned values from 1 to 8 (M = 6.0, SD = 1.6). For the stepchildren not identified at baseline, missing relationship data

were imputed by the first available follow-up observation. The contact frequency within those relationships did not differ from the contact frequency within the relationships with other stepchildren, $t(366) = 1.7$, $p > .05$.

Regular and important contact.—The question on the extent to which respondents perceive contact to be regular and important was posed as part of delineating the personal network. To obtain adequate information on their networks, respondents were asked to identify their personal network members by name (Van Tilburg, 1998). For children, the following question was asked: “Earlier in the interview you provided the names of all your living children. We would like to know with which children you have regular contact and who are also important to you.” Respondents were restricted to identifying only persons older than 18 years.

Family structure.—The following characteristics were included: dummy variables for the type of family structure, timing of formation of stepfamily, whether there were shared biological children in the stepfamily, and the total number of biological and stepchildren. Concerning the timing of the (re)marriage, we examined the age of the stepchildren when they entered the stepfamily (whether they were minors, i.e., 15 years old or younger [The standard definition of a “minor” in the Netherlands varies according to which legal rights it pertains, such as compulsory full-time school attendance {younger than 17 years} or alcohol consumption {older than 15 years}], or adults). For each family, the age of the youngest stepchild was considered.

Parent characteristics.—We examined the age and current and previous marital status of the (step)parents as control variables. With respect to current marital status, we distinguished between respondents who were married (first marriage and remarried), cohabiting, and single. For the previous marital status, we looked at whether the respondent had ever been divorced or widowed.

Relationship characteristics.—There were three control variables. The age of the child was included as the difference from parent’s age to avoid multicollinearity problems. Gender dyads were distinguished with both same-sex and opposite-sex parent–child dyads. Finally, traveling time was examined.

Procedure

Descriptive analyses were used to indicate both the differences between parents and between (step)children within different family structures. Furthermore, the aim of this study was to gain both insight in the influence of family structure on contact between parents and their (step)children and at the same time take into account the differences between biological and stepchildren. Therefore, we applied

Table 2. Description of Older Parents Within the Different Family Structures: Marital Status and History ($N = 2,756$)

Family structure	<i>N</i> parents		Marital status			Marital history			
	absolute	%	Married	Cohabiting	Single	First marriage	Divorce	Widowhood	Divorce + widowhood
Biological ^a	2,423	88	1,637	0	786	1,619	87	716	1
Complex ^b	72	3	33	23	16	0	27	36	7
Complex with shared biological children	9	0	5	0	4	0	3	6	0
Simple ^c (without stepchildren)	142	5	57	29	56	0	58	59	25
Simple with shared biological children	43	2	21	1	21	0	14	22	7
Simple (with stepchildren)	45	2	23	3	19	17	7	21	0
Simple with shared biological children	22	1	12	0	10	10	2	10	0

Notes: ^aFamily with biological children only.

^bStepfamily formed when parents, each with children from a prior union, start a new relationship.

^cStepfamily formed when one of the parents has children from a prior union.

hierarchical multilevel regression analysis (MLn; Rasbash & Woodhouse, 1995), with variables from different levels (children and the relationships with their parents nested within the parents) analyzed simultaneously. Analyses pertained to scores of contact frequency as the dependent variable in linear models and the probability of whether the contact was perceived as regular and important in logistic models.

Family structural characteristics included in the equations were type of family structure, moment of formation of the stepfamily, and whether there were shared biological children in the stepfamily. The total number of children was also added because this could also influence the contact between (step)parent and biological and stepchildren (Uhlenberg & Cooney, 1990).

Parent and relationship characteristics were taken into account as control variables. A greater age difference between respondents and children could increase the contact frequency (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). Moreover, children often identify more strongly with the parent of the same sex (Lee, Dwyer, & Coward, 1993), and mother–daughter relationships are often closer than father–son relationships (Silverstein & Bengtson). Furthermore, a larger traveling distance could provide less opportunity for contact.

RESULTS

Description of the Family Structure

The great majority (88%) of respondents were part of a biological family, and the remaining 12% were part of a stepfamily (Table 2). Each stepfamily type, except for the complex stepfamily with shared biological children, was represented by a number of respondents. Furthermore, the majority of the parents within the biological family were still married, with one third having become single primarily due to widowhood. Most parents in stepfamilies were also married. However, particularly within the complex stepfamilies, there were also a considerable number of parents who cohabited. Moreover, within the stepfamilies ($n = 333$), 58% of the parents had been widowed and 45% of the parents had been divorced. The majority of these parents were

in their second relationship: 58% within simple stepfamilies and 75% within complex stepfamilies. However, 11% of the parents in complex stepfamilies were in their third relationship compared with 6% of the parents in simple stepfamilies. Overall, there was great diversity within the different family structures, including the marital status and marital history of the parents within the different family structures.

In Table 3, we describe the adult (step)children within the different family structures. Of the 333 respondents in stepfamilies, there were 185 who did not have stepchildren. For these families, we did not assess the time at which the stepfamily was formed. Within 69 (47%) of the remaining 148 stepfamilies, the youngest stepchild joined the focal parent's family when he or she was 15 years of age or younger. In the complex stepfamilies, it was more common for children to enter as adults compared with the simple stepfamilies, $\chi^2(1) = 5.0, p < .05$.

Whether stepchildren joined the focal parent's family as a child or as an adult was related to the current marital status of the (step)parent, $\chi^2(2) = 19.8, p < .001$. Entrance of a stepchild as an adult was observed more often among respondents cohabiting with a partner (92%) compared with respondents who had remarried (48%) and those who had remained single (41%). Entrance of a child as a minor or an adult was also related to a history of widowhood or divorce of the respondent, $\chi^2(2) = 7.3, p < .05$. The stepchildren entered as adults in only 30% of the cases of respondents in their first marriage in contrast to 62% in the case of respondents who had been previously divorced and 56% where respondents had been widowed. A first marriage with a partner who already has children is primarily formed earlier in the life course of the individual in contrast to divorced or widowed respondents, where a stepfamily is formed later in the life course.

With respect to the total number of children, compared with other family types, the complex stepfamilies tended to have the largest average total number of children. Both partners have children from a prior union; for some complex stepfamilies, shared children further increase the number of children. The simple stepfamilies without shared biological children had the lowest average total number of children.

Table 3. Description of Older Parents and Their (Step) Children within the Different Family Structures ($N = 2,756$)

Family structure	<i>N</i> parents absolute	Entrance stepchild (absolute)		<i>M</i> number of children (1–17, <i>SD</i> = 1.9)		
		Minor	Adult	Biological, nonshared	Biological, shared	Step
Biological ^a	2,423	—	—	—	3.2	—
Complex ^b	72	23	49	2.6	—	2.7
Complex with shared biological children	9	8	1	1.8	1.8	1.8
Simple ^c (without stepchildren)	142	—	—	2.6	—	—
Simple with shared biological children	43	—	—	2.2	2.0	—
Simple (with stepchildren)	45	19	26	—	—	2.7
Simple with shared biological children	22	19	3	—	2.4	1.9

Notes: Dashes indicate that this situation cannot occur.

^aFamily with biological children only.

^bStepfamily formed when parents, each with children from a prior union, start a new relationship. For one respondent, the entrance of the youngest stepchild is not known.

^cStepfamily formed when one of the parents has children from a prior union.

Contact Between Parents and Biological Children

Before we answer the research question on the influence of family structure on the contact between parents and children, we compared biological and stepchildren. On a scale from 1 to 8, the average contact frequency was lower with stepchildren (estimated frequency = 5.3, $t = -8.4$, $p < .001$) than with biological children (estimate = 6.1). Moreover, the contact with stepchildren was perceived as less regular and less important (probability = .62; odds ratio [OR] = 0.30, Wald = 53.5, $p < .001$) than contact with biological children (probability = .85).

Table 4 shows the results of the regression of contact in biological relationships (left column) and of contact in steprelationships (right column). On the basis of the regression equations, we computed estimates for different types of family structure, controlling for the parent and relationship characteristics.

Turning first to the results on biological children, respondents in complex stepfamilies ($B = -.47$; estimate = 5.6, controlled for the parent and relationship characteristics) and within simple stepfamilies ($B = -.44$; estimate = 5.6) had less frequent contact with biological children than respondents in biological families (category of reference; estimate = 6.0). Moreover, respondents in biological families (category of reference; estimated probability of being identified as a network member = .85) and complex stepfamilies (OR = 1.13; probability = .87) perceived the contact to be more often regular and important than those in simple stepfamilies (OR = 0.47; probability = .73). The contact with biological children was not affected by whether the children were minors when the stepfamily was formed or by the presence of shared biological children. However, keeping in mind the fact that stepfamilies often consist of a larger total number of children, respondents with a larger total number of biological and stepchildren had less contact with their biological children than those with fewer children. This contact was also perceived as less often regular and important.

Considering the characteristics of the parents, cohabiting respondents had less contact with their biological children compared with married and single respondents. When the respondent had been formerly divorced, there was also less contact with the biological child compared with those who had never divorced. Moreover, divorced respondents considered the contact with biological children to be less often regular and important than respondents who had never divorced. Furthermore, respondents who were older had less contact with biological children and perceived the contact as less often regular and important than younger respondents.

With respect to the relationship characteristics, among the biological children, there was most often contact between mothers and daughters, followed by fathers and daughters, and contacts with sons. Remarkably, these gender differences were not observed with respect to whether parents considered the contact as regular and important. When there was a larger age difference between a respondent and a biological child, there was less frequent contact, and the contact was perceived as less often regular and important. Finally, when the traveling distance to the biological child was greater, respondents had less frequent contact, and the contact was perceived as less often regular and important.

Contact Between Stepparents and Stepchildren

Turning to the results on stepchildren, we found no significant difference in the contact with stepchildren within complex and simple stepfamilies. However, respondents perceived the contact with stepchildren within simple stepfamilies as more often regular and important (probability = .74) than contact with stepchildren in complex stepfamilies (probability = .45). The contact with stepchildren was not affected by whether the children were minors when the stepfamily was formed, by the presence of shared biological children, or by the total number of children.

Table 4. Linear and Logistic Multilevel Model Results Predicting Contact Frequency, and Extent to Which Contact Is Perceived as Regular and Important With Biological and Stepchildren

	Biological children		Stepchildren	
	Contact frequency ^a (<i>n</i> = 8,509)	Regular and important ^b (<i>n</i> = 8,316)	Contact frequency ^a (<i>n</i> = 368)	Regular and important ^b (<i>n</i> = 364)
	<i>B</i>	OR	<i>B</i>	OR
Constant	7.31***	106.91***	7.07***	101.90**
Family structure				
Complex ^c	-0.47**	1.13	-0.07	0.29**
Simple ^d (vs biological)	-0.44***	0.47***		
Stepfamily formed when children were minors	0.05	0.78	0.02	0.56
Shared biological children in stepfamily	0.33	1.55	0.05	0.77
Total number of biological and stepchildren (1–17)	-0.13***	0.73***	-0.08	0.95
Parent characteristics				
Current union				
Cohabiting (vs married)	-0.52**	0.92	-0.49	0.33*
Single (vs married)	0.08	1.05	-0.29	1.24
Ever divorced	-0.75***	0.54**	-0.04	1.98
Age (54–89 years)	-0.02***	0.97***	-0.03	0.94*
Relationship characteristics				
Gender				
Father–daughter (vs father–son)	0.18***	1.09	0.45	0.99
Mother–son (vs father–son)	0.03	0.79	-0.21	0.35*
Mother–daughter (vs father–son)	0.51***	1.28	-0.21	0.52
Age difference parent–child (-64 to 1 years) ^e	-0.03***	0.98**	-0.03*	0.93**
Traveling time (0–24 hr)	-0.12***	0.94***	-0.08***	0.93
Model fit				
Unconditional model deviance (-2LL)	29,850.3	5,980.4	1,452.3	469.1
Conditional model deviance (-2LL)	28,549.4	4,477.8	1,415.5	395.2
Model improvement (<i>df</i>)	15	15	13	13
Model improvement (χ^2)	1,300.9***	1,502.5***	36.9***	73.8***
Decrease in unexplained variance (level 1)	11%		8%	
Decrease in unexplained variance (level 2)	26%	15%	15%	3%

Notes: For logistic regression, multilevel models level 1 variance is fixed and therefore unreported. OR = odds ratio; -2LL = -2 log likelihood.

^aPossible answers were (1) *never*, (2) *once a year or less*, (3) *few times a year*, (4) *once a month*, (5) *once a fortnight*, (6) *once a week*, (7) *few times a week*, and (8) *every day*.

^bPossible values are (0) *no* and (1) *yes*.

^cStepfamily formed when parents, each with children from a prior union, start a new relationship. Among biological children, the complex family is contrasted with the biological family. Among stepchildren, the complex family is contrasted with the simple family.

^dStepfamily formed when one of the parents has children from a prior union.

^eComputed as 0 – age parent + age child.

p* < .05; *p* < .01; ****p* < .001.

Considering the parent characteristics, cohabiting respondents perceived the contact to be less often regular and important than married and single respondents. Whether the respondent had previously been divorced did not have a significant effect on the contact with stepchildren. Furthermore, the older respondents perceived the contact with stepchildren as less often regular and important than younger respondents.

With respect to relationship characteristics, only mothers perceived the contact with stepsons as less often regular and important. For age difference and traveling time, the results were similar to those for biological children.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we examined the family structure of older parents and their (step)children, further extending previous

research by focusing on the effect of family structure on the variation in contact between parents and their biological children and between stepparents and their stepchildren. Our findings show a great diversity within the different family structures, including whether children entered the stepfamily as a minor or adult and the total number of children within these families. Moreover, the marital status and marital history of the parents adds to the complexity of the different family structures.

The analyses gave indications of how the family structure might effect the variation in contact between (step)parents and (step)children. Consistent with earlier research (Ward et al., 2009), our findings show that parents have less contact with their stepchildren than with their biological children. More important, however, the results show that it is not only the difference between biological and stepchildren

that counts but also what the structure of the (step)family is. We find that parents have less contact with their biological children in stepfamilies than in biological families. Moreover, parents perceive the contact with biological children to be more often regular and important in complex stepfamilies than in simple stepfamilies consisting of stepchildren of the other parent but not stepchildren of the respondent. Within complex stepfamilies, parents may try to preserve existing relationships with biological children above the investment in a stepchild relationship, thus preventing the parent from being well connected to stepchildren. Biologically related parents and children have had a much longer time to get to know each other and greater opportunity to develop shared activities and interests than stepparents and stepchildren. Moreover, within complex stepfamilies, there may actually be less role ambiguity for parents because each partner is both biological parent and stepparent and the child is also both biological and stepchild. Within simple stepfamilies, each partner has only one role, that of parent or stepparent. Only the child has the role of both biological and stepchild. The uncertainties of the familial roles within simple stepfamilies may also derive from the sharing of the role of parent between the stepparent and the other (biological) parent (Cherlin, 1978). Within complex stepfamilies, the guidelines to roles and behavior may be clearer with parents focusing more on their own biological children.

With respect to stepchildren, stepparents perceive the contact as more often regular and important in simple stepfamilies than in complex stepfamilies. Maybe, there are fewer competing ties for stepparents within these simple stepfamilies, enabling them to invest more in the stepchild and become more emotionally close. Stepparents in simple stepfamilies do not have their own biological children to turn to; therefore, perceived obligations in emotionally close steprelationships may come to resemble those to biological relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 1999). Within simple stepfamilies, parents who did not or were unable to maintain relationships with their biological children, as may happen with a divorce, may actually be less emotionally close within biological relationships than within steprelationships (Ganong & Coleman, 2006). These results suggest that there may be less role ambiguity for stepparents in simple stepfamilies than complex stepfamilies, where there are more uncertainties derived from sharing of the role of stepparent between the two biological parents.

All in all, the findings suggest that the objective with which the simple and complex stepfamilies originate might be different. Stepparents in simple stepfamilies might make more of an effort to be a "reconstituted nuclear family" (Levin, 1997) where stepfamilies present themselves as if they were a first-marriage nuclear family. In comparison, (step)parents in complex stepfamilies do not attempt to reconstitute the family but rather focus on their own biological children. In this respect, this step-

family form seems to revolve more around the partner relationship than the family as an institution. The steprelationship is created and sustained by a partner relationship; the primary impetus for contact may be via the biological parent. When the partner relationship ends, the steprelationship might also end.

From the position that ambivalence is a bridging concept between social structure and individual action (Connidis & McMullin, 2002), our findings suggest that collective ambivalence exists within both stepfamily types; however, the impact is different for parents and stepparents within each stepfamily type. Collective ambivalence seems to have a greater impact on the contact between parents and biological children within simple stepfamilies and between stepparents and stepchildren within complex stepfamilies. There is a need to further develop the concept of collective ambivalence and incorporate it within a theoretical framework. A life course approach (Elder, 1998) to the presence of collective ambivalence could bring additional insight. Incorporating concepts such as family transitions, timing in lives, and linked lives could give more direction to how family structure histories affect the relationships between parents and (step)children within the same family.

We now come to some methodological considerations. Although our initial sample was large, the number of families with stepchildren was small. This can partly be explained by the fact that the likelihood of having experienced divorce is still rather low among Dutch older adults (Liefbroer & Dykstra, 2000). However, it might also be that the differences in contact between parents and their (step)children were underestimated because parents did not identify the stepchild as such. Underreporting may reflect the manner in which people define their families and child relationships, which suggests that it is important to recognize that family structure is subjective but can also change over time. White (1998) emphasizes that change and incongruity in the reports should not be seen as error but actually give meaningful insights into how people define their own families. If a measure specifically asking whether there were children from prior unions of the partner had been used, the number of stepchildren might have been more accurate. Because we assessed the existence of stepchildren in both a varied and a repeated manner, the problem of underestimation was overcome to some extent. Another limitation is that we did not have information on the marital history of the partner of the respondent. The marital history of both partners is needed to give a complete picture of the complexity of family structures. In this respect, it is also relevant to assess whether or not adult children spent time in the same household with stepparents, to what extent biological and stepchildren spent time in the same household, and the duration of cohabitation.

Although our study shows that many stepchildren had regular contact with their stepparents, an important question for future research is to what extent older stepparents can

actually depend on their stepchildren when they become more dependent and need care. As with many other surveys conducted in the community, our study included only few impaired older individuals. Future researchers may want to corroborate our findings for more dependent older parents. In this respect a study by Ganong and Coleman (2006), based on vignettes, observed that the motivation to help older stepparents is largely conditional, with relationship quality and the older stepparents' needs as major considerations. Helping a stepparent was mainly perceived as a way to fulfill filial obligations to the parent. Furthermore, based on the results of our study, we would expect that stepparents who become more dependent and need care are more likely to receive help from stepchildren within simple stepfamilies than within complex families. Finally, given the fact that so little is known about later-life steprelationships, it would also be of interest whether similar results would be found in countries where the increase in divorce and remarriage started earlier than in the Netherlands. Most probably, the number of later-life stepfamilies would be higher in these countries, and moreover, the norms concerning the contact within these stepfamilies might have become more institutionalized.

FUNDING

Netherlands Program for Research on Ageing (NESTOR) and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study is based on data collected in the context of the research programs "Living Arrangements and Social Networks of Older Adults in the Netherlands" and "Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam," which are conducted at VU University in Amsterdam and the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute in The Hague. S.v.d.P. planned the study and wrote the article. T.G.v.T. supervised, performed the statistical analyses, and contributed to revising the article.

CORRESPONDENCE

Address correspondence to Suzan van der Pas, PhD, Faculty of Social Sciences, VU University Amsterdam, Metropolitan Building, De Boelelaan 1081, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Email: s.van.der.pas@fsw.vu.nl

REFERENCES

- Aquilino, W. S. (1994a). Impact of childhood family disruption on young adults' relationships with parents. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 56, 295–313.
- Aquilino, W. S. (1994b). Later life parental divorce and widowhood: Impact on young adults' assessment of parent-child relations. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 56, 908–922.
- Cherlin, A. (1978). Remarriage as an incomplete institution. *American Journal of Sociology*, 84, 634–650.
- Coleman, M., & Ganong, L. (1997). Stepfamilies from the stepfamily's perspective. *Marriage & Family Review*, 26, 107–122.
- Coleman, M., Ganong, L., & Fine, M. (2000). Reinvestigating remarriage: Another decade of progress. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 1288–1307.
- Connidis, I. A., & McMullin, J. (2002). Sociological ambivalence and family ties: A critical perspective. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64, 558–567.
- Cooney, T. M., & Uhlenberg, P. (1990). The role of divorce in men's relations with their adult children after mid-life. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 52, 677–688.
- De Jong Gierveld, J., & Dykstra, P. A. (2002). The long-term rewards of parenting: Older adult's marital history and the likelihood of receiving support from adult children. *Ageing International*, 27, 49–69.
- De Leeuw, E. D., & De Heer, W. (2002). Trends in household survey non-response: A longitudinal and international perspective. In R. M. Groves, D. A. Dillman, J. L. Eltinge & R. J. A. Little (Eds.), *Survey nonresponse* (pp. 41–54). New York: Wiley.
- Deeg, D. J. H., Van Tilburg, T. G., Smit, J. H., & de Leeuw, E. D. (2002). Attrition in the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam: The effect of differential inclusion in side studies. *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology*, 55, 319–328.
- Elder, G. H., Jr (1998). The life course as developmental theory. *Child Development*, 69, 1–12.
- Ganong, L., & Coleman, M. (1994). *Remarried family relationships*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ganong, L., & Coleman, M. (1999). *Changing families, changing responsibilities*. London: Tavistock/Routledge.
- Ganong, L., & Coleman, M. (2004). *Stepfamily relationships: Development, dynamics, and interventions*. New York: Kluwer.
- Ganong, L., & Coleman, M. (2006). Obligations to stepparents acquired in later life: Relationship quality and acuity of needs. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, 61B, S80–S88.
- Henderson, S. H., & Taylor, L. C. (1999). Parent-adolescent relationships in nonstep-, simple step-, and complex stepfamilies. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 64, 79–100.
- Kalmijn, M., & Dykstra, P. A. (2006). Differentials in face-to-face contact between parents and their grown up children. In P. A. Dykstra, M. Kalmijn, T. C. M. Knijn, A. E. Komter, A. C. Liefbroer & C. H. Mulder (Eds.), *Family solidarity in the Netherlands* (pp. 63–88). Amsterdam: Dutch University Press.
- Knipscheer, C. P. M., De Jong Gierveld, J., Van Tilburg, T. G. & Dykstra, P. A. (Eds.), (1995). *Living arrangements and social networks of older adults*. Amsterdam: VU University Press.
- Lee, G. R., Dwyer, J. W., & Coward, R. T. (1993). Gender differences in parent care: Demographic factors and same-gender preferences. *Journal of Gerontology*, 48, S9–S16.
- Levin, I. (1997). Stepfamily as project. In I. Levin & M. Sussman (Eds.), *Stepfamilies: History, research, and policy* (pp. 123–134). New York: Haworth.
- Liefbroer, A. C., & Dykstra, P. A. (2000). *Levenslopen in verandering: Een studie naar ontwikkelingen in de levenslopen van Nederlanders geboren tussen 1900 en 1970 [Changing lives: The life courses of the Dutch 1900-1970 birth cohorts]*. Den Haag, The Netherlands: SDU.
- Mancini, J. A., & Blieszner, R. (1989). Aging parents and adult children: Research themes in intergenerational relations. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 51, 275–290.
- Pezzin, L. E., & Steinberg Schone, B. (1999). Parental marital disruption and intergenerational transfers: An analysis of lone elderly parents and their children. *Demography*, 36, 287–297.
- Pillemer, K., & Suitor, J. J. (2008). Collective ambivalence: Considering new approaches to the complexity of intergenerational relations. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, 63B, S394–S396.
- Rasbash, J., & Woodhouse, G. (1995). *MLn command reference, version 1.0*. Multilevels Project, Institute of Education, University of London.
- Silverstein, M., & Bengtson, V. L. (1997). Intergenerational solidarity and the structure of adult child-parent relationships in American families. *American Journal of Sociology*, 103, 429–460.
- Uhlenberg, P., & Cooney, T. M. (1990). Family size and mother-child relations in later life. *The Gerontologist*, 30, 618–625.
- Van Tilburg, T. G. (1998). Losing and gaining in old age: Changes in personal network size and social support in a four-year longitudinal study. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, 53B, S313–S323.
- Wachter, K. (1995). *2030's seniors: Kin and step-kin*. University of California at Berkeley.

- Ward, R. A. (2008). Multiple parent-adult child relations and well-being in middle and later life. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, 63B, S239–S247.
- Ward, R. A., Deane, G., & Spitze, G. (2008). Ambivalence about ambivalence: Reply to Pillemer and Suitor. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, 63B, S397–S398.
- Ward, R. A., Spitze, G., & Deane, G. (2009). The more the merrier? Multiple parent-adult child relations. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71, 161–173.
- Webster, P. S., & Herzog, A. R. (1995). Effects of parental divorce and memories of family problems on relationships between adult children and their parents. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, 50B, S24–S34.
- White, L. (1992). The effect of parental divorce and remarriage on parental support for adult children. *Journal of Family Issues*, 13, 234–250.
- White, L. (1998). Who's counting? Quasi-facts and stepfamilies in reports of number of siblings. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 60, 725–733.